

In Language Survival, is Every Barrier a Barrier? How Speakers of Majma-Ma Use Obstacles as a Context for Response

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Abstract

This paper examines the situation of Majma-Ma, an endangered language of the Middle East, and the barriers to its survival. Crucially, it describes how apparent obstacles to language maintenance can function as a context for response. After situating the Majma-Ma language in its geographic and cultural context, I provide an inventory of obstacles to its vitality. While some of the setbacks are certain and paint a bleak picture for the future of the language, others are complex and point in more than one direction. By examining the effects of such challenges along with speakers' responses to them, I show that – in hypothetical, symbolic and practical ways – some of these apparent obstacles in fact carry seeds for the language's survival. In particular, I consider geographic and political fragmentation, social marginalization, and national-language public education.

Résumé

Cet article examine la situation du majma-ma, une langue en voie de disparition du Moyen-Orient, et les barrières à sa survie. Fondamentalement, il décrit comment les obstacles apparents à la préservation de cette langue peuvent fonctionner comme un cadre pour la réponse. Après avoir situé la langue majma-ma dans son contexte géographique et culturel, je donne un inventaire des obstacles à sa vitalité. Si certains des reculs sont indéniables et projettent un tableau sombre pour l'avenir de la langue, d'autres sont complexes et pointent dans plusieurs directions. En examinant les effets de ces difficultés ainsi que les réponses des locuteurs, je montre – d'une façon hypothétique, symbolique et pratique – que quelques-uns de ces obstacles apparents portent en fait des semences pour la survie de la langue. En particulier, je considère la fragmentation géographique et politique, la marginalisation sociale et l'éducation publique en langue nationale.

Introduction

The first step toward strengthening an endangered language is an assessment of factors leading to its retreat and an understanding of ongoing barriers to its survival. As has been shown in the literature, hindrances to the vitality of a language can come from many directions: political, geographic, social, psychological, technological and in the end, financial. While the challenges are not in themselves positive, they force stakeholders – whether speakers of endangered languages, or people such as researchers or administrators concerned about the livelihood of these speakers – to think creatively about solutions.

This paper tells the story of Majma-Ma, an endangered language of the Middle East, and the barriers to its survival. But it also tells the story of how I, as a linguist, came to see that apparent obstacles to language maintenance can provide a context for response.

After describing the geographic and cultural situation of the Majma-Ma language, I assess apparent obstacles to its vitality. Certain setbacks must be acknowledged, and serve to highlight the language's fragility. Others, however, are complex and ambivalent. By examining the effects of these challenges and speakers' responses to them, I show that some of these apparent obstacles in fact carry seeds for the language's survival.

Language Situation

Majma-Ma is spoken by just over 4000 people distributed along the coasts of Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Iran. Although all dialects are mutually intelligible (Anonby & Yousefian, 2011: 61-63), to

speakers of the language there are two unconnected varieties, viewed as distinct by virtue of the cultural autonomy of each of two groups of speakers.

Kumzari, the larger variety, is spoken in Kumzar village and parts of two other towns on the Musandam Peninsula of northern Oman, as well as in scattered neighbourhoods in the cities of the UAE. It is by the name of this variety, Kumzari, that the language as a whole is referred to in the literature (Jayakar, 1902; Thomas, 1930; Skjærvø, 1989; Anonby, 2011; van der Wal Anonby, forthcoming). The other variety, Laraki, counts between 600 and 700 speakers and is limited to the single village on Larak Island in Iran, 30 km from the Iranian mainland and some 50 km across the Strait of Hormuz from the coast of Arabia (Anonby & Yousefian 2011: 41-44). The name "Majma-Ma", which I have chosen to use in this paper to refer to both varieties, comes from a term common to Kumzari and Laraki, and which means 'our language'.

The language has been classified as Indo-European, within the Southwestern family of Iranian languages (Skjærvø, 1989: 364). Surrounded by Arabic for over a thousand years (Anonby & Yousefian, 2011: 34), its lexicon and many of its grammatical structures are profoundly influenced by Arabic (van der Wal Anonby, 2013; Anonby, 2011: 375-6; Bayshak, 2002). Currently, the influence of the surrounding national languages – and in particular, Arabic – is accelerating: Arabic is taking over numerous domains and has influenced Majma-Ma to the point where some speakers are shifting completely. Given these realities, how can this language survive?

An inventory of obstacles

An inventory of key factors that can be used to evaluate language vitality are found in the seminal work of Fishman (1991) and followed up with extended lists in more recent publications (e.g., Fishman, 2001; UNESCO, 2013; Lewis et al., 2013). An assessment of the Majma-Ma language according to these factors unveils a sobering scenario, bringing out numerous situational barriers to its survival.

The first, and perhaps most obvious impediment to the survival of Majma-Ma is the modest population of the language community: there are about 4000 speakers, and the language is a minority in all but two of the settlements where it is spoken. In some parts of the world, this number in itself would give little indication of endangerment; however, surrounded as it is by the major languages Arabic and Persian, and displaced by these languages in an increasing number of domains, there is little question that the vitality of Majma-Ma is under threat.

All interaction with people outside the language community is in a language other than Majma-Ma. With the exception of a few, mostly older people, members of the Majma-Ma language community are uniformly bilingual: in Oman and the UAE they are fluent in the national language Arabic, and in Iran they are fluent in the national language Persian and in some cases Arabic as well (Anonby & Yousefian, 2011: 64-68). Since the Kumzari- and Laraki-speaking peoples are both part of larger regionally-defined ethnic groups (Shihuh and Bandari respectively; see “Social marginalization” below), even core elements of their culture such as the poetry sung during fishing and at weddings and funerals is conducted almost entirely in the language of the larger groups: Shihuh Arabic and Bandari Persian – which also happen to be varieties of the respective national languages. The palpable effect of such close interaction over many years has been massive contact-induced change in the grammar.

In recent years, the already significant place accorded to the national language in the daily lives of Majma-Ma speakers has been magnified by the universalization of school and the availability of television in each household. This situation is, of course, parallel to that of many language communities around the world. It means that on most days, for many years, each Majma-Ma child is exposed to several hours of intensive interaction in the national language followed by several hours of passive exposure to media, since at any given moment the television is performing in the background of most homes.

Additionally, community-internal perceptions of the language’s lack of value in the wider society has led to a recent development where some Majma-Ma families – especially the growing number that are living in mixed neighbourhoods – have started speaking to their children in Arabic in order to mitigate the perceived social disadvantages associated with speaking the mother tongue. Language shift is taking place across the

community, and for some speakers, this has evidently reached all domains of the language.

Despite all this, other apparent obstacles to the vitality of the Majma-Ma language point in more than one direction and intersect with one another in complex ways. I will now consider three such issues: 1) geographic and political fragmentation; 2) social marginalization; and 3) public education, a domain from which the Majma-Ma language has been excluded. By examining the effects of these challenges to language maintenance along with speakers’ responses to them, I will show here that – in hypothetical, symbolic and practical ways – these apparent obstacles carry seeds for the language’s survival.

Geographic and political fragmentation

One of the key factors which has been used to assess language vitality is that of residence patterns (Fishman 1991: 57ff.; Lewis et al., 2013). By this measure, for which homogeneity and fixed locality are seen as positive indicators, the Majma-Ma language fares poorly.

The language counts only 4000 speakers, but they are divided up among several communities of varying constitution: two villages (Kumzar and Larak-e Shahri), parts of two towns (Khasab and Diba), and scattered neighbourhoods in several large cities, including Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Ajman.

More seriously, speakers of Majma-Ma are a minority in most of the communities where they live. In Khasab, which along with Kumzar has the largest number of mother tongue speakers, they make up less than five per cent of the population. Over the past ten years, their traditionally homogenous waterfront neighbourhood has been assailed by the progressive filling in of the Khasab harbour with rocks and the building of the town’s first hypermarket, a football pitch, and several new neighbourhoods in its place. In these new, adjacent localities, there are a few Majma-Ma families, but most of the population is Arabic-speaking.

Only in the two primary villages of Kumzar and Larak-e Shahri does the Majma-Ma language community constitute a majority, with providers of government services (elementary schools, clinics and water desalination plants) making up the rest of the population. But here, issues such as water scarcity, lack of access to a reliable food supply, massive marine algal blooms triggered by urban pollution and vulnerability to extremes in weather plague both of these villages and highlight the precarious nature of their residence there.

The constituent language communities are far away from one another, with the three largest groups (Kumzar, Khasab and Larak-e Shahri) separated by hour-long boat trips, and the outlying groups in Diba (Oman) and the cities of the Emirates a further several hours’ drive from Khasab.

On top of the isolating effects of geographic fragmentation, the language group is politically divided

between three countries. While national borders are in many ways imaginary constructs, their presence in the Majma-Ma language area means that speakers are further isolated from one another, and need an identity card in order to cross the borders between the countries.

Taking a broader view of the situation, how could this geographic and political fragmentation – with all its inevitable disruptions – contribute to the survival of the language?

In any context, small ethnolinguistic communities are vulnerable. Clinging as they are to the shores of the Strait of Hormuz, where tankers and warships pass through daily, each of the communities that comprises the greater Majma-Ma language community is at particular risk.

Specifically, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that political factors from the outside may at some point impact the Majma-Ma community. The last decades of the 20th century saw a period of instability and civil strife in the region, and all of the countries where the Majma-Ma live were affected in separate events. There are a number of major military installations in the area, and some of these are situated within close proximity of the Majma-Ma communities. The sudden exodus of the Arab population of Hengam Island (near Larak Island) to the UAE during the last years of the Shah of Iran (Najmabadi, 1988: 69) shows that external disruptions of whole communities are not only possible, but attested.

I would argue that in this fragile situation, the Majma-Ma language community is – from the dispassionate viewpoint of probabilities – more likely to survive than if it were concentrated within a single area of a single country. Although the constituent communities are dispersed, the diversity of community types that they represent can respond better to external assaults than a single, homogeneous community would be able to do. If one community were displaced, others might remain. Speakers who live in parts of other towns and cities have the possibility of movement within the municipality even if their original neighbourhood is displaced. And if an event of major proportions were to take place, geographic and political distances are great enough between the scattered communities to help ensure the continuation of the language community as a whole.

Social marginalization

A second apparent obstacle to the vitality of the Majma-Ma language is the social marginalization of the language community. Even though linguistic diversity is technically welcomed in the region and, in the case of Iran, enshrined as a constitutional right, in practice there is no official recognition or accommodation of the Majma-Ma language in any of the countries where it is spoken.

This situation could be dismissed as an oversight, or as a question of practicality, since as a small language

Majma-Ma could pass under the radar of cultural policymakers. A closer look reveals, however, that it is a symptomatic of systematic social marginalization.

In each of the host countries that govern the language area, the Majma-Ma language community constitutes a minority within a minority. In Oman and the UAE, Kumzari speakers of Majma-Ma are an ethnic subgroup of the minority Shihuh Arab population. In Iran, Laraki speakers of the language are in the same way a little-known subgroup of the minority Bandari coastal peoples.

In the cities of the UAE, the tiny and fragmented population of Majma-Ma simply passes unnoticed alongside Arabic and large immigrant languages such as Urdu, Bengali, Malayalam and Balochi. But in the other countries where the language community is found, there are tangible effects of discrimination, based on both ethnic and religious considerations. The Majma-Ma language community, along with the Shihuh and Bandari minorities that they are part of, adheres to mainstream Sunni Islam, but this is not the prevailing brand in the main countries where they live. This places them at odds with the dominant cultures of these countries, and translates into inattention toward the regions concerned; in one case, it means a virtual bar from any employment in government or higher education.

It is not only at a national level at which this social exclusion is effected, but also at the hands of other players among the regional minorities of which Majma-Ma speakers are a part. For example, the participation of the Majma-Ma speaking Kumzari communities as core partners in the Shihuh tribal confederation dates back to the first written records of the region (Jayakar, 1902; Lorimer, 1908/1915; Thomas, 1929), and is routinely recounted in Kumzari oral literature, but the Kumzari find themselves today nudged outside the Arabic-speaking nucleus of the regional society; there is limited cordiality between the Majma-Ma speaking Shihuh and their Arabic-speaking counterparts. As a case in point, there is presently a regional administrative directive which bars Kumzari people in particular from using the name “al-Shihhi” (= Shihuh), even though many of them have this name on their original birth certificates and other official documentation from the years before the regulation came into effect.

Although there are often many social disadvantages that accompany one’s belonging to a minority religious, ethnic or language community – and in the case of Majma-Ma all three of these criteria apply – in the present situation these barriers to inclusion, designed to weaken a community, have resulted in the opposite effect: one of building shared identity. Majma-Ma speakers have their own mosques, and gather together in weekly *majlēs* (community meetings) and the less formal daily *xa šababan* (clubs for hanging out). Thanks to their solidarity, the Kumzari community has managed – by agreeing on a candidate and voting in large numbers – to send the single elected representative from

the Musandam region to the Omani *Majlis al-Shoura* (National Consultative Assembly) for the past several legislative terms. Such symbolic successes in the face of adversity bolster the community's sense of its worth and identity in relation to the larger community and, along with it, pride in their struggling language.

National-language education

The final threat to the vitality of Majma-Ma that I will consider here is the encroachment of the national languages Arabic and Persian into the daily lives of Majma-Ma speakers. The main, and most intensive way by which the national language enters the lives of Majma-Ma children is through schooling.

For children growing up in Majma-Ma communities, education means a new cultural and cognitive trajectory. For a number of decades, selected children were sent away for schooling (and this is still the case for children in high school), but there is now a national-language elementary school in all of the Majma-Ma communities, including the two principal villages of Kumzar and Larak. As mentioned above, this means that on most days each Majma-Ma child will be intensively exposed to Arabic or Persian for several hours.

How is a fragmented and marginalized community of 4000 speakers to address the effects of national-language education on its language? In the wake of the Majma-Ma language and culture that it steadily displaces, can national-language schooling engender hope for the extension of the language?

There is obvious cause for concern, but there are at the same time some favourable developments concerning the Majma-Ma language which have come about as a result of speakers' internalization of national language education.

In the first instance, one speaker of Majma-Ma, Ali Hassan Ali al-Kumzari, on his own and with only the inspiration of traditional Arabic grammar to work from, started writing down lists of Kumzari words and making grammar notes in 2005. When we settled in the language area in 2008, he spent much of his time sharing this work with us. Documentation had begun – without any funding or the intervention of linguists from outside of the language community!

It was once we settled in the area that Ali started sending me text messages – in Majma-Ma! I soon learned that it was not only Ali who regularly texts in Majma-Ma – it is most of the younger phone-owning members of the language community. Here, heritage meets technology!

While being able to text in one's own language is (apparently!) important, it became clear when transcribing longer recorded texts in Majma-Ma that Arabic orthography is not, without modification, an adequate tool for expressing the full range of phonological and morphological distinctions in the language. One of the highlights of working with the Majma-Ma language community was using our

phonological analysis of the language, together, to come up with a writing system suited to the language: readable for Majma-Ma speakers already familiar with Arabic from their schooling. It is with this freshly-minted alphabet (Xanaghu Kumzari, 2009) that we are transcribing a book of folktales and compiling a dictionary of the language.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that obstacles to the vitality of an endangered language can, in some cases, provide a context for its survival.

As a linguist dedicated to the documentation of languages under threat, I initially approached the Majma-Ma language expecting the worst. The situation is indeed serious in the small, fragmented language community, with speakers adopting the national language in existing and new domains, and a complete shift taking place in some families. But for some of the apparent obstacles to survival, certain aspects of the very forces that imperil the language can provide a context for response.

The responses I have illustrated here are variously hypothetical, symbolic and practical. While the language community is geographically fragmented and the constituent communities are separated by national borders, this impediment provides a measure of long-term security for the language group as a whole in a volatile region. The Majma-Ma communities are marginalized within their national and regional societies, and yet this same pattern of antagonism brings about the cultural solidarity essential to the positive language attitudes necessary for language maintenance. Finally, while education in the national language continues to undermine the breadth and richness of their linguistic heritage, it has provided speakers of Majma-Ma with tools for the codification of their own language in an age where a written code may be essential its survival.

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